

What converts

FROM PRISON TO THE PASTORATE

MRS. J. HAL SMITH



PASTOR ALMAREZ AND FAMILY

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IT is an unusual thing to take a man just released from prison and send him to preach the Gospel. This was done with one man in the Philippine Islands and he has not disappointed those who trusted him. The man I refer to is Mr. Leon Almaraz, or "Pastor Almaraz" as his people affectionately term him. He first became known to our missionaries as Ciriaco Parilla—a name under which he passed some years in disguise. Rev. and Mrs. H. W. Widdoes and I made a trip into the Igorote Mountains to visit Pastor Almaraz and his flock. We traveled by automobile till the roads narrowed into steep, crooked mountain trails, then set off on foot over the rugged paths. Early in the afternoon of the second day of our journey, when I was almost ready to drop from exhaustion, Pastor Almaraz and one of his members met us with fresh horses and brought such good cheer that all the remainder of our trip was delightful. From the hour we met him we were "anxious for nothing." He seemed to anticipate our every need. The best homes were thrown open to receive us, the best rooms and beds were set apart for our use and the best food was provided. Pastor Almaraz insisted on preparing much of the food with his own hands to make sure it would be quite good enough for his American guests. Many a mountain chicken met its fate the day we came. From actual count, when they were served at table, we observed that some of them appeared to have six or eight legs.

The mountain people were eager for the Gospel and kept us in services early and

late. At every home where we stopped our host gathered his neighbors for meetings. It was surprising to see how quickly a congregation could be "rustled up" and ready. In every place we found people ready and waiting for Christian baptism. The actual time we spent in this field was only from Saturday evening till the following Wednesday morning but during that time we had eleven services, twenty-six baptisms and five weddings.

Pastor Almarez has now been at Kabayan only a little more than two years but has a church membership of 234 people. His field covers several towns and barrios. Two deaconesses are now furnished by the Filipino conference to assist him. He says that one thing he likes about his Igorote Christians is, that when they decide to follow Christ they "throw away the old life and begin to lead a new life." We are persuaded that he is right, for according to their own testimony a radical change has come to them. Pastor Almarez said, "I cannot remember a day the past year that I have not talked with somebody concerning his spiritual welfare." If one should ask this pastor where he received his training he would probably answer with a half-humorous, half-sad smile, "I received my training in the university of Bilibid." In this answer anyone who is familiar with the name of the great prison in Manila may read his life tragedy. Pastor Almarez speaks English, one of his acquirements in the aforesaid "university." While we sat together in his home at Kabayan I asked if he would mind telling me his story, and this is it as I heard it from his own lips.

He was an Ilocano by birth. When a young man he became a soldier in the Filipino army and later a soldier of the Constabulary. While here he and his fellow soldiers attempted an insurrection

against the American government of the Islands. They killed their guard and secured his arms, but alas! the attempt proved unsuccessful.

Promises made by men they trusted were not fulfilled and the little band of "patriots" was quickly placed under arrest and sentenced to heavy fines and long terms of imprisonment. Of all the company, Leon Almarez, alone escaped, perhaps, because he was cleverer, bolder, and swifter of foot. He fled to the mountains and hid himself in the town of Sigay. As his brother was town clerk in that town it was an easy matter to register himself under the Igorote name of Ciriaco Parilla. He donned Igorote dress, grew a moustache, and lived like the Igorotes and finally married the daughter of the leading man of the town. She never once suspected that she was marrying a well disguised criminal.

As Pastor Almarez now looks back over his life I think he would say that the "red-letter day" of his life was that day when "Pastor E. J. Pace" came to Sigay and preached the Gospel message. "He drew my picture as we sat talking together that first day; and then showed it to me" said Pastor Almarez, "One night he sat up with me the greater part of the night unfolding to me the meaning of the Christian religion. I found my hungry heart eagerly answering to the truth he taught. I was convinced and I believe I was really converted then. As I yielded myself in obedience to this new and wonderful truth I felt a deep peace and a great new joy thrilling my whole being." Not long after this "Pastor Pace" was called back to Sigay as a number of candidates were desiring to be baptized. He found forty-one Christians waiting him and of that group "Ciriaco was the very first to bow his head to receive the sacred ordi-

nance which he felt was to set him apart and brand him forever as a disciple of his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And then, what do you think the missionaries did? They asked "Ciriaco" if he would become a sort of shepherd to the flock in that town. "Well," said Pastor Almaraz, with a far-away look in his eyes, "I consented. Then and there I began preaching the Gospel and I have been doing it ever since."

"And you continued in hiding after you had become a Christian!" sharply interjected a man who sat listening to the story. He was a member of Mr. Almaraz' present flock and seemed shocked to think his good pastor could have ever been guilty of such an unworthy action. "Yes" replied the Pastor, "you see I was well disguised." And we who sat near could well read the words of his heart which he did not utter "I was in a hard place. Nobody knows how hard till he has been there himself."

But "Ciriaco's" heart was not at rest. His old crime still haunted him. He did not know that when out of his presence the missionaries remarked to one another, "Can that man be an Igorote? What an unusual type of Igorote he is!" Sometimes the missionaries urged him to go into other towns to preach, then again they urged him to go to the lowlands to attend the Institutes but he steadfastly refused without giving them any reason. But at last the guilty truth leaked out. A man who hated "Ciriaco's" new religion reported him to the Constabulary and one day "Ciriaco" was suddenly confronted by officers who bound him with ropes and carried him away to Vegan for trial. Here he turned to the United Brethren missionaries for counsel and they advised him to confess the whole truth and trust God for the outcome. His lawyer, on the contrary said, "Tell nothing. If you do I shall have no ground left on

which to defend you." But "Ciriaco" did what a Christian should do, he confessed the truth and then received his sentence of five years in Bilibid prison in Manila together with a fine of 2000 pesos (\$1000).

Though this young Christian went to prison he did not quit preaching. He said to himself, "Even in prison I shall have liberty to serve God." He found that the hundreds of his fellow prisoners needed the very message of hope and salvation he could bring them and began his work for Christ at once. Sometimes the missionaries visited him in the prison but at their first visits he was so overcome by emotion that he could not speak to them. All he could do was weep. They comforted him and told him God would not forsake him.

It is a long, long story to tell of those years in prison. Every duty assigned to "Ciriaco" he tried to do "as unto the Lord." In a short time he was registered as a first class working prisoner with a small daily wage, later as second foreman, with a much larger wage, then as first class foreman; thus one badge of authority was exchanged for another higher up and he constantly had special credits and special privileges granted. He was finally made assistant to the cashier and had the handling of many of the prison funds. He was able to secure a number of good books and spent his spare hours studying with a view to improving his mind and heart. Faithful in the work of his hands he was also faithful in the work that lay nearest his heart. He was chief of a brigade numbering above 300 men, talking much with them about the Christian religion. He also visited other brigades and talked with them. He constantly urged all the men to attend the Sunday School and Church services held in the prison, with the result that they came in crowds. His joy knew no bounds as he saw them, one after another,

yielding their lives to Christ's sway. Drunkards, thieves, murderers and all kinds of criminals were converted. Whenever there was no preacher for the services "Ciriaco" was a willing substitute. During his stay in Bilibid there were probably several hundred men, at least, who were led to Christ through his influence.

At last the day came when "Ciriaco" was set free. Because of good conduct his term in prison was shortened and he was forgiven the whole fine of 2000 pesos. Turning a deaf ear to the plans his brother and others had for his future he went directly to the home of Rev. H. W. Widdoes at San Fernando. Here they talked "Kabayan" at every meal, with the result that he was soon appointed to the work among the Igorotes at Kabayan among the Benguet Mountains. What a joy it was to be reunited with his wife and child whom he had not seen for over four years. Now they have a happy home with two sons, Moses and Samuel, and a niece of Mrs. Almarez who makes her home with them. It is not hard to see how truly this Christian family lives in the hearts of the Igorote Christians. One of the finest mountain ponies has been given Pastor Almarez by his loyal-hearted people, and on pony back he rides over the mountain trails ministering to their needs. This pony was at my service constantly during my stay among the mountains. I called him "Billy" and the name is with him still.

"Ciriaco," now Ciriaco no more but the true Pastor Leon Almarez, is glad he confessed his wrong and cleaned up his past records. He witnesses that God's great help was with him through it all. He was given only half as long a sentence in prison as the other men and even that was shortened. Some of the men were sentenced to thirty years and are still at Bilibid. While this pastor preaches to his mountain people he

cannot forget his old companions and he still writes sermons to send back to those men in the prison.

After recounting to me the whole checkered story Pastor Almaraz added thoughtfully, "I now believe those years in prison were a part of my Lord's plan for my life. Because of them I am better prepared for the work I am now doing."

